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Wellington Zoo

Spreading the Bear Truth

Sadly, not every sun bear is treated as well as our Sean and Sasa. In the wild this beautiful breed of bears and others face many challenges like mistreatment and habitat loss.

To see how we can turn this situation around, Caroline Colgan, Team Leader Learning, and Oli du Bern, Team Leader Visitor Experience, took a recent trip to help the Free the Bears projects in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Free the Bears is a charity set up to protect bears across Asia. To date an amazing 785 bears have been rescued and cared for at its eight sanctuaries in six countries.

Caroline and Oli's first stop was the Phnom Tamao Bear Sanctuary in northern Cambodia. This was the sanctuary that rescued our male sun bear, Sean from a restaurant, before he went to live at Perth Zoo in 1998. Today, its small team of 11 is responsible for up to 140 rescued Asiatic black bears and sun bears.

Understandably staff and volunteers have little time to work on signage and messaging around the sanctuary. This is why Caroline and Oli's visit was so vital, both being experts in communicating animal welfare messages at Wellington Zoo.

A prime spot to start this was at Phnom Tamao Bear Sanctuary's new young bear and Asiatic black bear viewing areas. Oli and Caroline spent their time creating signage full of animal information to fill these spaces, as well as contributing to its visitor guide book.

In Vietnam they visited Cat Tien Bear Sanctuary in southern Vietnam. Although this sanctuary is only two years old, it is forward-thinking. In their three days there Caroline and Oli worked with them on educational signage.

Reflecting on the trip, Caroline said: "The two countries we visited have very different challenges with bears. For example, there is no bile farming in Cambodia, unlike Vietnam, but they see no problem with keeping bears as pets or trading animal parts for food. It is clear that facilities like the education centre at Cat Tien are the next step on the journey for bear conservation in South East Asia."

Oli added: "The issues for bears here are all due to people, and this situation will only change with a collective change of mindset. The work Caroline and I have completed here will hopefully help the team get the right messages out there."



Caroline and Oli with Cookie the Sun Bear

Oli and Caroline wrote an online blog every day during their time with Free the Bears in Cambodia and Vietnam, so if you are interested in finding out more you can visit tinyurl.com/2ala4nx for pictures, videos and much more.

Free the Bears is one of Wellington Zoo's conservation projects. Together with our own sponsor, Arataki Honey, we raise money for this important cause. For more information about Free the Bears please visit www.freethebears.org.au

MATT KENNARD

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Monarto Zoo

How safe are our rhino?

With the current wave of poaching sweeping the world one has to ask, how safe are our rhino? Will we go to check them one morning to find them butchered for their horns? This may sound alarmist, but think about it. What security do we really have in place? Is it sufficient to deter a committed attack on home soil?

Zoos have often been the target (seen as targets) for theft. Over the years, birds, reptiles, monkeys and meerkats have been taken from zoos across the country, some for pranks, and others for commercial gain. Most recently the theft of the cotton top tamarins from Alma Park Zoo springs to mind.

The killing of any zoo rhino for its horns would and should raise worldwide condemnation, but the damage would be done.

Rhino horn is worth far more than gold. We all know that there are unscrupulous people out there who are willing to commit unthinkable acts for money. Two prominent South African veterinarians were among those recently arrested and charged with killing rhino.

In Africa and Asia rangers fight and die to protect the last of the rhino under their care. These rangers are armed and in some cases have government approval to kill poachers on sight, but this is still not a deterrent. In many cases the army is now involved in protecting rhino. Africa is suffering its worst poaching in 15 years and it is escalating, as are the techniques employed to take this expensive but illegal commodity. There are reports of helicopters and tranquiliser drugs being used, with horns being taken from living rhino, the latest myth being that the horn is better if the animal is alive when



Photo: Geoff Brooks, Monarto Zoo

the horn is removed. With this done these animals are left to die from blood loss and organ failure. Are we secure or even correct in thinking it won't happen here?

How can we be sure that the security measures we have in place are not being studied? Most zoos now run some form of Behind the Scenes tours. These tours clearly identify holding areas, access points and enable scoping of security.

Casual conversations during these tours can unwittingly furnish a wealth of information about zoo practices. After hours functions give entry after dark.

Are the larger open range zoos at more risk? At these facilities rhino are generally far from the perimeter fences, yet after hours are alone. There are security patrols, and staff on site, and in some instances infrared cameras and monitored alarms, but how would these measures deal with an armed, determined assault, should one occur? What immediate support do we have?

It is calculated that the average adult white rhino carries 6-7 kg of horn, and rhino horn is selling for up to US\$60,000 per kilo. Do the maths, how much money do we

have on the hoof at each zoo within the region?

How far will we go to protect our rhino? Zoo's generally struggle for funds and additional security costs money. Imagine the financial implications if some of the zoos that hold rhino weren't deemed secure enough to protect them.

Do we as a group need to view this as a realistic threat? Should we all do the exercise and evaluate the security of our properties as related to our rhino? These are all questions that need to be asked, as sadly we may find that it is a case of when and not if the unthinkable happens.

If the unthinkable did happen, what would be the result? Would it raise the ire of the world's conservation fence sitters enough to gain more support for rhino protection across the globe, would the use of rhino horn in traditional medicines suffer, or would it be just another news story that runs for a day and is then forgotten?

I think we all need to ask the question, "How safe are our rhino?"

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